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WHEN LATIN EARS ARE DEAF¹

By BESSIE M. CAMBURN
Mount Clemens, Michigan

The subject which has been assigned to me has served to remind me anew of the truth of Hamlet's

Let Hercules himself do what he may
The cat will mew and dog will have his day.

Full many a time and oft in the early years of my teaching experience, my colleagues of the Latin department gently insinuated that I was of the number of those who having ears hear not for I had failed to teach certain essentials to the correct use of English in the shape of verb paradigms, and the uses of the objective case. And now I am bidden by one of your number to speak on a subject, the very phrasing of which invites to an enumeration of the sins, negligences and ignorances of teachers of Latin. The invitation to criticism is one which I shall not accept. If there has been lack of correlation between the work of the two departments, if ability in Latin has not carried over into the realm of English, I believe that the difficulty is due more to the fact that English teachers have not appealed for specific help, than to the deafness of Latin ears.

I hold a brief this evening for the study of Latin and if I should say anything which could be interpreted as denying its value as an aid to the mastery of the vernacular, I beg that you will regard me as an unwilling witness. Though I speak with the tongue of a barbarian, I have chiefly loved the company of those who have drunk deep at the ancient springs. There and there only, I am convinced are the copious fountains of good taste in the use of the mother tongue and of ability to interpret, with accurate nicety, the expressed thought of others.

It would be easy, indeed, to cite the mastery of English exhibited by some modern classicists, Professor Shorey, for example,

¹ Written for the Michigan School Masters' Club.

the rare flower of whose style with its perfection of symmetry and rhythm, has been nourished, one cannot doubt, in the rich loam of the past. But I am to speak to you of the ninth grader who has gnawed for five tedious months upon the Latin file. What can the weary teacher of English composition find in his work which is not to be found in that of his friends who have taken the broad and easy path which leads to the typewriter, the dictaphone and the adding machine? Does English come via Latin? I am to speak to you, too of the high school Junior or Senior who has completed the two years of Latin which are required by the college which he hopes to enter. The two years are, in most cases, all that he has and all that he ever will have. Have these two years rendered indirect service to his English?

It was with these questions in mind that I undertook a little investigation of the work of these two classes of students in Mount Clemens High School, the ninth grader who had completed one semester of Latin being compared in certain particulars with his fellows who had not elected the subject. In the same way, the work of pupils in the last two years who had passed two years of Latin or more was compared with that of those who had never learned to conjugate *amo* or who had been signally unsuccessful in their attempt. The latter group never included any one who had been in a Latin class longer than a semester.

I prepared first a list of twenty words which boys and girls misspell frequently, and which I am able to spell correctly only because I call to mind the Latin words from which they are derived. There were no words in the list which the ordinary individual might not want to use at some time in the course of his life. Some of those included were separate, familiar, Mediterranean, optimist, perspiration. In checking the lists, only errors were counted which knowledge of the Latin root would assist one to avoid. For example, failure to double the *r* in *referring* was not counted, as only a rule in English spelling is involved; but a student of Latin should recognize the fact that in the *re fero* combination, there would be no place for a doubled *f*. I expected that in both groups examined, the Latin students would greatly excel, both because knowledge of the language would give them

the advantage and because I supposed them to be better to begin with. In the ninth grade, eighteen Latin pupils averaged 62.2% and forty-eight boys and girls who had not even experimented with the subject, averaged 64.5%, very little difference though the little there is, is in favor of the non-Latin group. I give the results which I obtained in grades eleven and twelve with great diffidence for I do not know how they are to be explained. Twenty-five pupils who have passed two or more years of Latin averaged 77.4% while nineteen pupils who have either not taken the subject or have failed dismally in it, averaged 81.8%. I made what might be called a weighted spelling list by listing the misspellings of the Latin group. Conscientious was the banner word. Thirteen out of twenty-five pupils who had passed two years of Latin failed in the *scient* combination. Perspiration was missed by ten, apparatus, by ten, auxiliary, similar and laboratory each by eight, etc.

I felt that I must believe that either the commercial department was teaching spelling very well or that the Latin student had not realized that his language training might do him yeoman's service in so practical a matter as the spelling of English words. The influence of the English department was an entirely negligible one for like the sun, it shines alike upon the just and the unjust. It may be urged that this is a mean and lowly service to expect from the study of Latin, that Minerva was not wont to be a handmaid either of gods or of men, that the teacher of Latin is aiming at higher things, such as literary appreciation, knowledge of the relation of the ancients to us, power of expression, etc. There are, however, other considerations involved in this spelling test than the purely mechanical ones which are evident. The pupil who spells conscientious, *conshenshus* or perspiration, *prespiration* has failed to grasp the real inner meaning of the word, what Thoreau calls the soul of the word, and is unable to use it with discriminating conscientiousness.

It is here that I suspect that teachers of English have left undone what we ought to have done. Is it a matter of common knowledge among Latin teachers that many high school boys and girls suppose that *description* is *discription* and that the abbrevia-

tion for et cetera is ect? When we send out this S. O. S. call to the Latin department for help in spelling, we shall need to specify the particular cases in which a remedy is needed. Latin as a general tonic, taken internally with a pious hope for general good results will never be efficacious. A list of words compiled by teachers of English from actual misspellings of pupils and turned over to teachers of Latin with a humble request for assistance would undoubtedly bring about results. Such coöperation would be to our mutual benefit, the correct English spelling strengthening the Latin and vice versa. A list of Latin derivatives which children really need to use and which they really misspell would contain probably not more than fifty words but the yearly number of misspellings of these words by high school pupils would be innumerable. I suppose we have been remiss about sending out this call for specific help because we have only lately come ourselves to realize that the range of pupils' misspellings is much smaller than we had thought.

The next phase of our investigation was merely a repetition of the work done by Professor Starch as set forth in *The School Review*, Vol. 23. The method of procedure might be explained briefly. Three tests of what Professor Starch calls grammatical knowledge and one test of grammatical ability are given to a group of students. The first gives a cutting from "The Mill on the Floss" and pupils indicate the part of speech represented by each word. The second tests knowledge of cases by giving a piece of connected discourse and requiring the pupil to place above each noun and pronoun the abbreviation for its case. By a similar method knowledge of mode and tense is tested. In these three tests of grammatical knowledge, we obtained about the results which Professor Starch says are to be expected. The scores made by the Latin students showed conclusively that that study had materially increased their knowledge of these three phases of English grammar. Statistics are odious to every one except to their compiler to whom they are fascinating so I refrain from giving the full results. In the case of both groups of students, our figures seemed to show that the non-Latin student knew something of the parts of speech but cases, modes and tenses were to him an undiscovered

country. In the 9th grade, the Latin students indicated on the average of 28.4 parts of speech in three minutes and the non-Latin 21.4, not a very great difference. In the tests involving knowledge of tenses and cases, the difference was much greater. In the 9th grade groups the Latin students designated correctly 13.6 cases of nouns and pronouns to 8.3 scored by non-Latin pupils and 15.6 in the modes and tense test to 8.2, in each case being about 1.7 times as successful. The proportionate degree of success was about the same in the two groups of third and fourth year students.

We then used Starch's test of grammatical ability which consists of about forty sentences in each of which a choice of two forms is given, the pupil to cross out the one which he believes to be incorrect or bad. This test is arranged as a scale composed of a series of increasing steps of equal differences of difficulty. The results obtained in Mount Clemens high school were little short of astounding. The Latin 9th graders who had shown in two important phases of grammatical knowledge a performance 1.7 times as successful as those who had had no Latin made an average score of 8.3 steps passes on the Starch scale of ability to use the English language. The first year students who had not studied Latin and who were very deficient in knowledge of case, tense and mode, made an average score of 9.3 on the same scale. The third and fourth year pupils who had completed two years of Latin scored 10 while those who had had no Latin averaged only 9.5, the very small difference being in favor of the Latin group.

Professor Starch's conclusions based on results such as these are that the study of foreign languages only very slightly increases the pupils' ability to use English correctly and that the correct use of English is largely a matter of habit and of example rather than of knowledge. If this be true, then are we as teachers of English of all men most miserable. If there is no body of knowledge which can be taught to furnish fixed criteria by which the pupil can measure his use of language, we are without hope in the world. No teacher of English can hope by means of the most ingenious devices in the shape of language games or what not, in forty-five minutes of time by precept or example to counteract the

habits of the other waking hours of the twenty-four when the pupil lives, moves and has his being, in a world of linguistic anarchy and license where *I done it*, *I laid down* and *between you and I* are recognized as good form. There is very little incentive for effort on our part for those pupils who hear good English spoken outside of the school will speak well, while for the other unfortunates there is only outer darkness.

Some of us, however, feel impelled to seek for more light because we know that certain grammatical principles have been a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. We know that we have deliberately discarded the forms which were current in that state of life unto which it pleased God to call us, because we knew that they were grammatically incorrect.

Why is it that the high school pupil makes no apparent use of his grammatical knowledge gained from his study of Latin while some of us here know that we are constantly testing our written and spoken words by grammatical standards? Our ability to make such use of grammatical principles has its basis in a long linguistic experience during which we have learned to select useful generalizations which are applicable to difficult language situations in English. If the high school pupil's two years of Latin are to serve as a touchstone by which he can test his use of the vernacular, we shall need to specify the cases in which it will give him unfailing help. In other words, the situation in grammar is much like that in spelling. Classifications of actual errors made in the pupils' speaking and writing are needed in order that the Latin teacher may know of the particular difficulties for which a remedy is desired. For example, the pupil with even two years of Latin has learned that it is a law as unalterable as that of the Medes and Persians that the subject and predicate must agree in number. From his limited linguistic experience it is doubtful whether he will see that that generalization bears any relation to such an English situation as "A different set of knives and forks was or were put on the table." At any rate from the results of the Starch test, we learned that many of them failed to make any such connection. Latin, as a general tonic, a sort of spring medicine, good generally for one's English failed again in

this particular. Specific application for specific ailments might be marvellously efficacious. In other words, coöperation between the two departments is needed. Again I insist that it is not so much the deafness of Latin ears as that we, the physicians, to whom is entrusted the healing of all language ailments, have made hazy diagnoses, and have not known exactly what aid we needed from the consulting specialists.

Such a program of coöperation would be greatly aided if certain sections of English classes were made up entirely of Latin students. The English teacher could then make full use of the grammatical knowledge which she knew was in the possession of all the class and she could constantly reinforce the drill upon the applications which had been previously given in the Latin classroom. The problem is so to concentrate in both classrooms the drill upon English forms which are related to Latin usages that we may crowd into the two years of required Latin the ability to apply grammatical principles which has come to many of us through a long and broad linguistic experience. This, I believe to be possible and practicable; for the range of pupils' grammatical errors has been shown to be comparatively small, and half a dozen such principles drilled upon, in season and out of season, in both classrooms would eliminate a large percentage of errors, at least in written work.

The last set of test material was used only in the ninth grade. It consisted of the English vocabulary test devised by Mr. W. L. Carr, formerly of the University of Chicago High School, and described in *THE CLASSICAL JOURNAL* of October, 1919. The test consists of fifty complete sentences each of which contains an under-scored word of Latin origin which the average pupil might reasonably be expected to meet in his general reading. In writing the test the pupils were asked to explain briefly the meaning of the under-scored word. The results obtained showed that our Latin students knew how to use intelligently their Latin vocabularies in deriving the meanings of English words. The pupil who had passed one semester of Latin defined correctly an average of eighteen words while the non-Latin pupils scored only ten.

It is significant to note that there has been here a rather high degree of coöperation between the work of the two classrooms.

In the Latin classroom, faithful and effective drill has been given in the technique of derivation. On the English side, we use the Hitchcock text which contains one long chapter on word building providing an endless amount of drill in the meaning and use of Latin prefixes which the pupil is required to affix to many common Latin roots the meanings of which are given. He is then stimulated to look for the original meaning of the Latin root in the English word which he has so formed. From these results, it would seem almost safe to generalize far enough to say that in the one phase of Latin teaching in our high school where the instruction as to the application of the knowledge acquired to English situations has been of a specific character, specific and measurable results have been obtained.

Now let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter. To the end that the pupil may know how to make use of his Latin in order to solve difficult language problems in English, specific instruction must be given in the Latin classroom in the application of general linguistic principles with drill upon illustrative English sentences. Certain English sections might well be composed of Latin students alone. In these classes, procedure could be based upon the positive assurance of the possession of grammatical knowledge on the part of all the pupils.

In the same way, the technique of derivation should be applied to the spelling of a short list of English words in which the spelling difficulty may be eliminated by knowledge of the spelling of the Latin root. Latin can best render first aid to English if it is applied, not as a panacea but as a specific remedy intended for certain specific ailments from which the patient is known to be suffering. Its efficacy will, in that case, largely depend upon the thoroughness with which it is applied.

The philosophy of the mineral bath attendant in Mount Clemens seems to me to fit the case rather well. She is interested only in one's most swollen joints and as she concentrates upon these, manipulating each with skilled but none too tender fingers, she has but one answer to give to the feebly demurring patient: "Jest the water won't do you no good. It's in the rubbing."